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Introduction to the Chronological Bibliography on the Intertitle in Silent Films

by Claire Dupré la Tour

In the first years of cinematography, the exhibitors mostly used magic lantern slides to project films titles before the film's projection. In Europe and in the United States, around 1902–1903, motion pictures started to be sold with edited titles on films, and edited subtitles on multi shot films. From around 1907, as the length and number of shots, subtitles and words increased, there was a kind of competition between the subtitle and the lecturer to explain the films to the audiences. In the transitional period – 1907–1916 –, the trade press and scenario manuals constantly debated subtitle usefulness and limits. On one hand the dream of cinematography as a universal language was incompatible with this device, and the strong ideal of the titleless film advocated that moving pictures should tell stories by themselves, without the aid of any external narration, like theatre plays. On the other hand, there were more realistic approaches: subtitles were unavoidable, as they were essential to make a film understandable. The main recommendation, however, was to use them very sparingly, and only when it was absolutely necessary, because they might spoil suspense by giving a summary of the action in advance, they were also considered to have an adverse impact on the “reality effect”, to be exterior to the story and to interrupt the flow of images. Despite the reluctances and ambivalences towards it, as the industry organized itself in the 1910's the subtitle was retooled, and became

conventional and largely used for the construction of the classical narrative film.

The issue of writing on the screen was also addressed in the 1920s with debates arising on its use and the “nature” of cinema. The French avant-garde based its idea of cinema on the plasticity of the image, on editing and movement, and used subtitles as little as possible. The German Kammerspiel and expressionism were experimenting with titleless narrative films, while the Swedish school and Soviet filmmakers systematically used the device, particularly as structural elements. Reflections on the subtitle were also developed and debated, especially by the Russian formalists.

The subtitle question arose again with the advent of synchronized sound. It was largely considered then that films without synchronized sound were incomplete, and that subtitles obliterated the reality of the image by contrast with analogical sound, which contributed to the impression of reality. The stalwarts of silent film contested strongly those positions. Following the widespread ideologies and ambiguities of its time, especially re-launched with the arrival of synchronized sound, the device was classically considered as a pale attempt to express dialogues, palliating the absence of synchronized sound.

The term “intertitle” was not used during the silent movie era; it seems to have appeared in the early 1930's to differentiate the device from the speech translation that was beginning to appear at the bottom of the images in foreign languages productions.

In the 1950's the ideology of transparency particularly rejected the so-called ‘intertitle’ that interrupted the continuity of the images. When mentioning the device, classical film history and theory rapidly underlined troubles in reference to the silent period debates. The intertitle was classified as an obsolete

accessory that had more or less esthetic or specific functions in some famous productions of the silent period. It was generally mentioned that they could be classified into identifiable categories – such as containing dialogue, motivating a scene, time, or image change.

From the 1960's onwards, modern film theory has tried to understand the film through semiology and adaptation studies, inspired by structural linguistic and literary models of analysis. Although comparison of film with language largely dominated the field, the internal manifestation of language that forms the intertitle was considered a marginal and non-specific skill of movies, presenting a major semiotic difference with the image: the text relation to the referent was different from the one of the moving photographic image. Theory has focused more on cinematographic particularities (moving photography, framing, editing, etc.) and literary theory was already looking at the paratext (chapter subtitles, prefaces, etc.), as an accessory with respect to the principal body of the text. This might explain how film 'subtitles', in their turn, were considered an accessory. They were also doubtless ignored because they were so visible and because of the absence of close relationship between film theory and history.

In the 1960's and the 1970's, an embryonic academic interest could be observed in short parts of general books or articles; this interest slowly grew with some sparse works tackling specifically silent films intertitles.

In-depth research on early cinema took a real start at the Brighton 1978 FIAF Congress with a symposium giving the impulse to revisit pre and early film history in retracing facts from archival sources. Studies on editing, lecturing, and sound, for example, have developed and become fields of research. However, the intertitle did not benefit as largely from this impulse. From the mid 1980's, it has been granted a few pages in general works on early cinema, and some more specific articles have begun to consider their role in films and with respect to the history of cinema and of film form. Works on early US cinema were going to provide description and facts. The works of Kristin Thompson, Janet Staiger, Tom Gunning, Eileen Bowser, Charles Musser, etc. were not specifically focusing on the device but were describing its manifestations in the material

those authors had observed. At the same time, narratology was slightly approaching intertitle's function in film narration, like in André Gaudreault, François Jost or Christian Metz's works. By the end of the 1990's, two conferences were organized at the University of Udine (Italy) and the Cinémathèque française (Paris), where academics and archivists were invited to rethink together the intertitle from historical, theoretical and archival points of view, in a fully international effort.

Practical problems partly explain the paucity of historical and theoretical attention concerning the intertitle. Trying to retrace its history is confronted with the problem of the conservation of films and their intertitles, especially early films. Film restorers are also confronted with this problem. Preserved negatives include mostly "flash titles" or cues to indicate where to place the intertitle in the copies. Yet positive prints are often devoid of intertitles. Either their material underwent alterations, or the boxes containing intertitles, which were supposed to come with the reels, have been lost. They also may have been removed from the prints as past releases sometimes suppressed or modified them. There are often copies of the same film with fewer, more, different, or translated intertitles, or none at all. Hence, multi version films are good materials to study the device through different versions of a same film, and other sources than the films themselves – such as copyrights, catalogs, trade press articles, scenario manuals, music scores, etc. – can help identify important landmarks in the history of the practice.

Today, we can see, through published articles, and doctoral or MA dissertations, that the research interest on the topic has grown. The enlarged contexts of cultural studies, adaptation studies, women studies, or screenwriting studies have provided new academic focuses on this device. Inventorying texts, witnesses to the period's practices and discussions of the issue, will continue providing a historical understanding of the intertitle impact on cinematography developments and concepts. Media intermediality approaches will certainly be also productive. Finally, the study of the device should shed new lights on the relationships between cinema and other modes of representation, between cinema, language, and narrative and literary categories.

**Bibliographie chronologique sur
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graphie des Zwischentitels
Assemblée par Claire Dupré la
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